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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the art of oral interpretation from a "vocal" perspective--that is, it focuses on the crucial nature of vocal dimensions in oral interpretation. Moreover, the essay argues for an interpreter's hierarchy of vocal needs (modeled after Abraham Maslow's 1970 theory). The interpreter's hierarchy of vocal needs involves basic comprehension, refinement, and other higher level needs. In particular, the essay: (1) briefly reviews selective theoretical dimensions of voice development; (2) offers a speech communication professor's personal perspective on the subject; and (3) provides suggestions for the future, including the necessity to bridge the gap between the leading theorists of oral interpretation and its competitive practice. Contains 14 references and 2 figures outlining "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" and "Interpreter's Hierarchy of Vocal Needs." (Author/NKA)

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The Loud, Clear, and Transporting Voice of Oral Interpretation

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Abstract

This essay examines the art of oral interpretation from a "vocal" perspective. Moreover, it argues for an interpreter's hierarchy of vocal needs--modeled after Abraham Maslow's 1970 theory. The interpreter's hierarchy of vocal needs involves basic comprehension, refinement, and other higher level needs. In particular, this essay (1) briefly reviews selective theoretical dimensions of voice development, (2) offers a personal perspective, and (3) provides suggestions for the future.

The Loud, Clear, and Transporting Voice of Oral Interpretation

I believe that the primary "tools" in oral interpretation are facial expressions, visual communication, and, probably most importantly, the voice. In other words, while one's face and focus are important, vocal dimensions are absolutely crucial. As such, I will be examining vocal comprehension and refinement in oral interpretation. First, I shall briefly review selective theoretical dimensions of voice development. Then, I will offer a personal perspective. Finally, I will provide some suggestions for the future.

Selective Theoretical Dimensions of Voice Development

Certainly there is a body of literature to be found on vocal development. Early in the history of our national speech association (today's SCA), there was a considerable amount of journal space devoted to it (see Matlon & Ortiz, 1992, pp. 815-816). Today, there is some attention to voice development in general speech communication as well as forensics journals. In addition, there are various texts which discuss the vocal instrument--particularly in such specific areas: oral interpretation, voice and diction, public speaking, and directing forensics. Since my focus here is essentially in oral interpretation, I will examine sources that are primarily with that orientation.

Ten years ago, Geisler (1985) pointed out that among the top OI "theory" institutions (Louisiana State University, Northwestern University, Southern Illinois University, and the University of Texas) in three out of four cases (SIU being the exception) they had little to do with competitive oral interpretation (p. 71). Of course, today this has changed with the University of Texas and its competitive oral interpretation prominence. Still, however, there is an interesting oral interpretation theory and competitive practice dichotomy that sometimes complicates our attempts to advance both--as we are attempting to do in today's panel.

In their classic work on oral interpretation, Lee and Gura (1992) discuss "voice development" in five areas:

1. breath control
2. volume and projection
3. pitch and quality
4. rate and pauses
5. intelligibility of speech (pp. 75-88)

Gamble and Gamble's 1994 oral interpretation text provides a similar discussion of the sub-categories of voice development with the addition of a discussion on the levels of meaning in selections, i.e., content and relationship levels and the appropriate vocal responses (p. 34).

Yordan's 1993 interpretation text takes a slightly different approach to studying the voice as she discusses its use in specific contexts or roles (i.e., prose, drama, and poetry). Nonetheless, she essentially focuses on such traditional considerations as pitch, quality, rate, and volume (see, for example, pp. 229-230). This is often the approach taken in texts on forensics (see, for example: Faules, Rieke, & Rhodes, 1976; Klopf, 1982; Swanson & Zeuschner, 1983; and Hindman, Shackelford, & Schlottach, 1993).

Not surprisingly, the preceding texts in oral interpretation and forensics provide a fairly traditional focus on the vocal instrument as it may enhance or detract from the interpreter's art. The voice as an enhancing versus detracting aspect of oral interpretation was, in fact, listed as a primary "judging standard" at the Second National Conference on Forensics in 1984 (see Parson, 1984, p. 90). Another issue of importance often briefly alluded to in the previously discussed literature is the nature versus nurture issue regarding vocal development. This issue appears to be examined in comparatively more detail in voice and diction texts.

For my purposes, a standard and representative work in this area is Raymond Rizzo's 1969 text, The Voice as an Instrument. He discusses vocal potential in the following terms:

> You were born with a certain vocal potential. Your voice depends for its quality on the thickness of your vocal cords, the shape of your skull, the amount of flesh on your skull, the shape of your mouth and lips, the formation of your teeth, the thickness of your rib cage, the capacity of your lungs, and so on. (Rizzo, p. 85)

Rizzo, however, does go on to say that you can improve the pitch range, learn the proper pitch placement of your voice, and alter your tone, vocal power, and rate (p. 86).

There are, of course, some fairly fatalistic perspectives on the limitations of vocal development. Such a viewpoint was recently presented in a Knight-Ridder News Service article apparently paraphrased from the work of a physician and human anatomy authority, Robert Sataloff. This article discussed the limitations of vocal coaching (particularly for singers) with the following warning:

> Voices are sound-producing instruments. And like all instruments, some are better than others. And all of them can accomplish so much and no more. (Vedantam, 1995, p. 24A)

Since we are educators and hopefully choose to believe that we can make a difference, we will not let this dire observation dampen our pedagogical spirits. As such, my personal view on the enhancement of vocal comprehension and refinement in oral interpretation will be presented in light of what we appear to already know:

1. Not surprisingly, the voice is viewed as my number one priority (or primary focus) in oral interpretation.
2. There was an abundance of theorizing about it--particularly in our journals in the early days of SCA.
3. There still appears to be a general dichotomy between OI theory (i.e., leading theorists) and the competitive practice.
4. For the most part, OI texts appear to examine the traditional aspects of the voice regarding breath control, volume, pitch, rate, and intelligibilty.
5. Forensics texts and conferences appear to focus on the voice in OI with regard to (a) specific contexts (prose, poetry, and drama) and (b) the enhancement/detraction implications.
6. Finally, the nature vs. nurture issue probably needs to be minimized--lest we want to lose our jobs!

A Personal Perspective

I will be examining many of the traditional aspects of the voice in oral interpretation, but I hopefully will focus on them in somewhat of a different manner. In particular, I will focus on "basic comprehension" and "refinement" factors. I believe that this is a good way of framing what we do when we teach or coach OI, that is, we first work on basic comprehension, then we try for refinement and other higher level "needs."

Psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs provides an analogous theory.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

In Maslow's conception of human motives, one essentially must satisfy lower level needs (i.e., physiological ones) before becoming concerned with needs at higher levels. Similarly, one must satisfy the need to be comprehended

before other interpreter needs are met. (For an application of this theory to the art of argumentation, see Vartabedian, 1987.) It is obvious, when there is no or limited basic comprehension by the audience of the interpreter's literature, many significant problems develop. As such, I would like to organize my "personal perspective" on the voice in OI around (1) basic comprehension needs, (2) refinement needs, and (3) the ultimate need/goal of "transporting" listeners.

Basic Comprehension Needs

As noted in Figure 2, I have isolated volume, articulation, and rate as basic comprehension needs. Simply stated, in terms of volume, one must sufficiently "project" in order to be heard. I am amazed at the number of nervous and/or novice interpreters that I simply cannot hear. Perhaps I am getting too old and am losing my hearing. But, then again, perhaps too many interpreters are untrained and insensitive to the art of vocal projection.

I may be sounding like a "back-to-the-basics" educator, but I think that we can learn a significant amount about vocal projection by simply examining some of the elocutionary traditions of our discipline. Two years ago, I co-directed a musical with a speech and theatre professor who happened to be in his eighties. I learned more in six weeks of rehearsal about vocal projection from this man than I would have ever imagined. Indeed, the kind of traditional, elocutionary training that he received and was willing to share with us was invaluable. Moreover, I am concerned that many of us (and consequently our students) are deficient in such basic comprehension training.

Articulation is another important basic vocal need in OI. Again, if you are not even comprehended because of insufficient articulation, how in the world do you communicate meaning, do justice to your literature, and ultimately "engage" your audience? As I see it, the problem here is a lack

of vocal, articulatory exercises combined with many lazy speech patterns. Being from the Texas panhandle, I cannot tell you how many times I have missed the dramatic climax of a selection as a result of such problems.

Rate is yet another significant basic vocal OI need. In all honesty, excessive rate is not a problem in the Texas panhandle, although sometimes you wish it were. Seriously, "insufficient" rate can become a basic comprehension problem as the listener becomes so bored that he/she begins to attend to any and all distractive messages. More typically, excessive rate is the basic problem here as the interpreter fails to allow enough time for listener comprehension. One very sadistic shock treatment for excessive rate in OI, is to physically force the perpetrator to sit through just about any round of intercollegiate debate and then to write on your chalkboard "I will not do that. I will not do that..." one thousand times.

Refinement Needs

As we examine Figure 2 once again, we are now to discuss vocal refinement needs. Interestingly, the same variables that we viewed as basic comprehension needs (i.e., volume, articulation, and rate) can become refinement needs once they transcend basic understanding. For example, many interpreters fail to realize the tremendous volume opportunities available in most oral interpretation situations that are not frequently available in acting/theatre. Specifically, interpreters are often in a much smaller physical space such that a very wide range of volume levels can be offered--from whispers to as loud as the audience is willing to tolerate.

In terms of articulation--which I will define as the "act of speaking distinctly"--many opportunities exist once comprehension is apparent. Of course, there are a multitude of interesting vocal distinctions to pursue, e.g., accents, dialects, and a number of creative vocal characterizations.

In fact, David Alan Stern, who is now at the University of Connecticut, has developed this aspect of vocal refinement into a fascinating "science." His business, "Dialect Accent Specialists, Inc.," provides a wide variety of audio tapes for accent creation/reduction, dialect training, and general voice improvement.

In reference, finally, to rate, vocal refinement here becomes as significant as anything an interpreter can do. In fact, I have long been convinced that the effective use of the "pause" is the interpreter's most important tool. Listen to some of the truly great actors of this century--Charles Laughton, Laurence Olivia, Orson Welles--and observe their use of the "pause." Moreover, it is often times not what they say, but what they do not say (and choose to reflect upon). A part of this is an appropriate sense of the importance of "variety" in one's rate. Specifically, not all details in a given selection are of equal importance, and, consequently, one's rate (and emphasis) should reflect this.

Ultimate Need/Goal

Consistent with our Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs analog is the fact that the interpreter should have an ultimate goal--vocalic and otherwise. I believe that this goal involves what I call "transporting" listeners. When a listener is transported, he/she is "taken away" from the reality of the time, place, and situation and taken to the reality (humorous, dramatic, etc.) that is created by the interpreter. Perhaps this can be labeled "mood alteration or manipulation." Regardless of the label, it involves an astounding control of the listener's state of mind. In summary, I contend that only through vocal mastery of basic comprehension as well as refinement needs may one reach (or attempt to reach) this ultimate oral interpretation need/goal.

Suggestions for the Future

The selective literature examined in this essay as well as my observations on vocal comprehension and refinement prompt several suggestions for the future. As previously discussed, it appears that certain elocutionary aspects of the speech communication field may need to be taken more seriously by aspiring interpreters. Many of us were taught that the elocutionary movement was overly reliant on prescriptive rules and almost comical in nature. However, the strict discipline and focus-on-the-basics inherent in this movement may be necessary or, at least, worthy of partial consideration for many of today's interpreters.

Similarly, I contend that a solid course in "Voice and Diction" should be seriously considered as a prerequisite to a course or competitive experience in oral interpretation. As discussed, the interpreter must first and foremost be comprehended before he/she truly engages or "transports" the listener. A well conceived and implemented course in "Voice and Diction" could help fill a seemingly significant oral interpretation comprehension void.

Although this is obviously an age-old problem, it appears to me that continued efforts are needed in bridging the gap or dichotomy between the leading theorists of oral interpretation and its competitive practice. For example, when was the last time a designated conference was held which specifically addressed this issue? I would hope that even in their disagreements that participants at such a conference could learn from one another.

Finally, additional empirical research to experimentally test previously discussed intuitive ideas could be beneficial. For example, are there clear and recurring interpreter vocal attributes that contribute to truly engaging a listener? Additionally, is the effective use of the "pause" really as significant as previously asserted in this essay? Such empirical research can certainly expand our body of knowledge about the fascinating and complex art of oral interpretation. Indeed, our ultimate goal is for the "loud and clear" voice of oral interpretation to be heard and appreciated.

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Figure 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

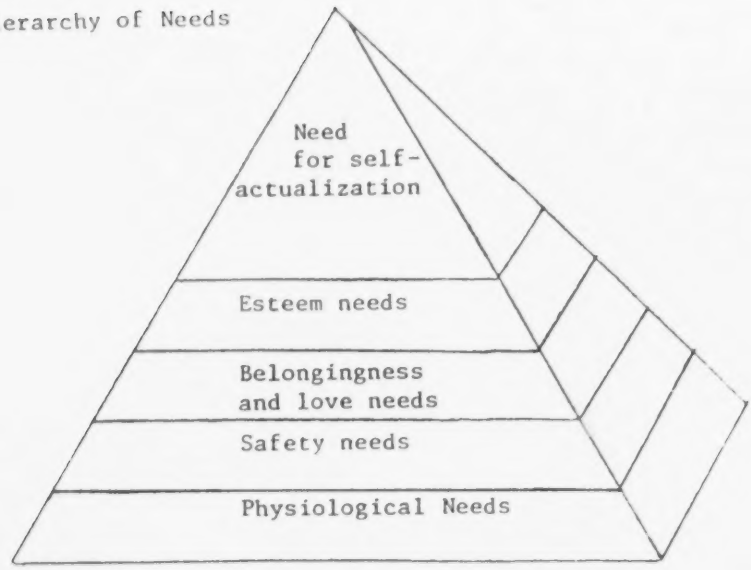
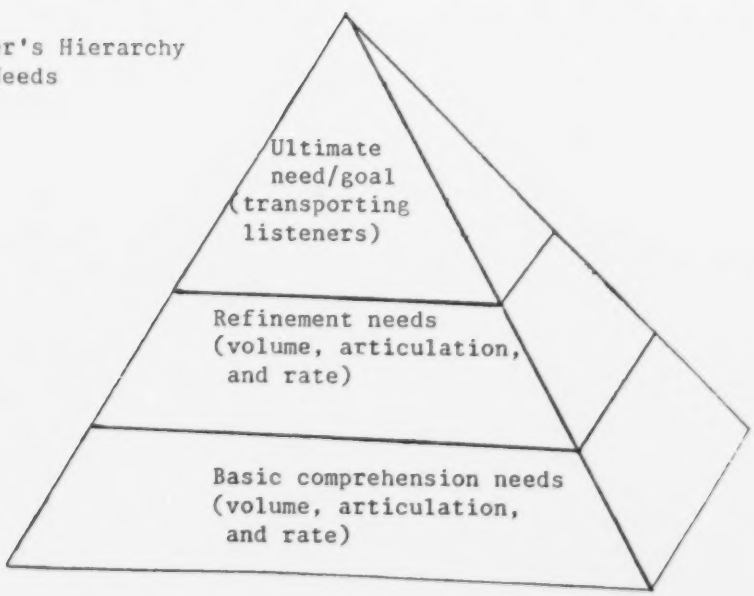


Figure 2

Interpreter's Hierarchy of Vocal Needs


Ultimate need/goal (transporting listeners)
Refinement needs (volume, articulation, and rate)
Basic comprehension needs (volume, articulation, and rate)